

Doing what comes naturally: the domestication of bug and humbug at Melville's table

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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was a landmark in nineteenth-century America. The ideas of this acclaimed lecturer, essayist, and poet had a strong influence on the development of American culture. He encouraged both the scholar and the poet to stand up and take a central role in the building of the nation's identity. Although inspired by European writers, he urged them to break free from European models in order to create a new American culture based on philosophical, religious, literary and cultural emancipation.

Written after his return from Europe in the aftermath of the death of his wife and the resignation from the ministry in 1836, the essay "Nature" was Emerson's first published work, summing up his ideas and laying down the principles of Transcendentalism. Inspired by Western philosophers such as Plato, Swedenborg, Rousseau, and Kant, this movement rejected traditional religious and intellectual authority. Instead, they proposed the empowering of the self-reliant individual deeply connected to nature and connected to God through nature. The essay shows Emerson's manifest interest in the natural sciences, recently acquired while in France. In Paris, besides attending a lecture on chemistry, he visited the *Jardin des Plantes* and the Cabinet of Natural History, which caused a lasting impact on him: "Emerson's moment of insight into the interconnectedness of things in the *Jardin des Plantes* was a moment of almost visionary intensity that pointed him away from theology and toward science" (Richardson 143). But he did not abandon theology, just exchanged the conventional version of his formative years for a more individualistic, free and unorthodox approach to existence based on his love for nature. In the essay, Emerson suggests a new way of considering nature as a means of approaching the mind of God, since, according to the author, He is present in nature's endless circles:

Within these plantations of God, a decorum and sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. (...) Nature is the symbol of spirit (...) We can foresee God in the coarse, and, as it were, distant phenomena of matter (...) behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; (...) Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man? Once inhale the upper air, being admitted to behold the absolute natures of justice and truth, and we learn that man has access to the entire mind of the Creator, is himself the creator in the finite. (10, 20, 40, 41)

Nature, thus, presented almost as an actual Garden of Eden, is the place where individuals can regain both reason and faith. This faith has Neoplatonic and pantheistic overtones since nature is understood as a symbol of spirit; the spirit in nature and the material phenomena reflect God's presence and, finally, it enables the individual to have direct access to the deity. This access to the mind of the Creator is also said to empower man almost to the level of a miniature god.

In their 1986 article, Teresa Cid and Teresa Alves asserted that Emerson "laid down the foundations for a new epistemology of perception, fusing the worlds of spirit and matter" (97). In a sense, he even tried the fusion of their respective traditional approaches — religion and science — in spite of their methodological and political differences, which did not always allow for a pacific coexistence throughout history, due to the struggle for power of the forces behind both. A meaningful dispute would take place two decades after "Nature", with Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, which gave rise to a huge controversy on both sides of the Atlantic, despite Darwin's concessions to religion and the presentation of his theory as a complement to religious teachings. In 1833, William Whewell coined the word "scientist", and the word "science" began to signify the study of the natural and physical world. By the mid-nineteenth century, articles on scientific questions appeared side by side with fiction, poetry and literary criticism in periodicals, magazines and newspapers (Otis xvii). As science gained in prestige, nineteenth-century literary writers tried to gain credibility by incorporating the voices of scientists or exploring their writing techniques (*idem* xxiv). In terms of the

relationship between science and religion, it is important to acknowledge that Transcendentalism as an intellectual movement was originated in 1830s in the context of the New England Unitarianism, which tried to harmonize Christian doctrines with the advances in the natural sciences. This background eventually contributed to the secularization of the religious beliefs within the movement. At the beginning of "Nature" Emerson declares: "All science has one aim, namely, to find a theory of nature" (7). It is expected that in nature individuals can regain both reason and faith; since these are the tools of perception in science and religion, Emerson seems to be encompassing the two, without neglecting intuition: "a dream may let us deeper into the secret of nature than a hundred concerted experiments" (43).

In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson proposes that the scholar be educated by nature, by books, and by action in order to become "Man Thinking". Of the three, nature is considered the first in importance in terms of the influence upon the mind. In the address, Emerson concludes that: "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim" (56). The new motto combines the Greek Delphic aphorism and Platonic maxim with Emerson's own appeal to go into nature.

Some, like his friend and protégé Henry David Thoreau followed this advice literally and went to live in the woods, in Emerson's property, near Walden Pond, outside Concord. The experiment was later shared with the public in the book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854):

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. (63)

As stated in the text, Thoreau practiced the Emersonian principle of having nature as a teacher through immersing himself in it. First of all, he wanted to apprehend the essential facts of life and life's meaning. In practical terms he intended to live in as simple a manner as possible and to test his self-sufficiency skills. The overall experiment proved to be a voyage of self-discovery and a deep spiritual quest.

Others, like Herman Melville, did not need a programmatic experiment to test the overwhelming powers of nature, while sailing around the globe in extreme conditions. His traveling and working experience was certainly also a path of self-discovery and spiritual development, but without the Thoreauvian artificial attitude about the process in itself. Nevertheless, Melville's adventures provided the subject for his early novels. Meanwhile, Emerson's popularity kept growing and he became an omnipresent character in the American intellectual arena. In addition to the essays, the lectures he gave throughout the country and in Europe proved to be particularly popular. By the mid nineteenth-century, writers and intellectuals in America would naturally consider Emerson's ideas, choosing to follow or criticize them. At best, they would probably do both, given the complexity of Emerson's writings. Such is the case of Herman Melville (1819-1891). This essay addresses the relationship between his short story "The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations" and the principles stated in "Nature" (1836). Throughout his life, Melville maintained a permanent interest in Emerson's writings, in spite of a seemingly paradoxical double reaction of acceptance and rejection of his ideas. Melville's works established several dialogues with Emerson's texts, namely in terms of philosophical allusions to idealism and mysticism. These features led several early reviewers to draw comparisons between his books and Emerson's style. In some cases, the similarities may also spring from common readings since both authors had a similar taste for writers and philosophers.

Written in the spirit of "The American Scholar" and "The Poet", the essay "Hawthorne and His Mosses" (1850) is considered Melville's "Declaration of Independence" for the American writer (Robertson-Lorant 250). In this essay, he expresses his admiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's collection of short stories *Mosses from an Old Manse*, published in 1846. Melville also conveys his awareness of the importance of the role of the

writer in the United States and his secret hope of fulfilling his own potential as an author. The collection was written in the early 1840s while Hawthorne was living in the Old Manse, in Concord, a house where his friend Emerson had lived six years before, while writing "Nature". This is acknowledged in the preface to the book — "The Old Manse. The author makes the reader acquainted with his abode" — where Hawthorne also tries his hand at nature writing. In "Hawthorne and His Mosses", Melville evokes both Emerson and Hawthorne as he indirectly alludes to "Nature" through quoting Hawthorne citing Emerson.

How does Nature deify us with a few and cheap elements!
Give me health and a day, and I will make the pomp of
emperors ridiculous. The dawn is my Assyria; the sun-set and
moon-rise my Paphos, and unimaginable realms of faerie.
(Emerson 15)

It was here that Emerson wrote "Nature"; for he was then an
inhabitant of the Manse, and used to watch the Assyrian dawn
and Paphian sunset and moonrise, from the summit of our
eastern hill. (Hawthorne 1124)

So all that day, half-buried in the new clover, I watched this
Hawthorne's "Assyrian dawn, and Paphian sunset and
moonrise, from the summit of our Eastern Hill." (Melville,
The Piazza Tales 241)

Praising the deifying qualities of nature, Emerson establishes the dawn and the sunset as outstanding moments of the day. Throughout the successive citations, Emerson's Assyria and Paphos gain substance and come to represent not only Hawthorne's and Melville's empyrean moments of the day, but also the importance attributed to the spirit of the place to be felt in the writers' houses. This same topic can be later found in the prefatory piece of Melville's short story collection *The Piazza Tales*.

Though the influence of Transcendentalism has been traced in several works throughout Melville's life, the response changed with time. Michael McLoughlin considers that his writing career can be divided into two phases with *Moby-Dick* as the pivotal shifting moment (165). According to him, *Moby-Dick* is "both a Transcendental *and* an anti-Transcendental work" as it presents "Transcendental idealism and its

simultaneous subversion”; from this novel on the author assumes a “much darker and increasingly anti-Transcendental philosophical position” (xii, xvi, 165). As Melville grew in his writings and in his readings, the optimistic and popular first sea novels were gradually replaced by more philosophical, somber and speculative writings that did not especially appeal to the general reading public and brought the corresponding share of unpleasant reviews and reduced sales. The dilemma of writing to express oneself as the opposite of writing to please an audience was clearly presented in one letter to Hawthorne:

The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood that in which a man *ought* always to compose, — that (...) I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me (...) What I feel most moved to write, that is banned, — it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches. (*Correspondence* 191)

Though Melville had previously embraced Emerson’s idealism to a certain extent, he gradually departed from what for him became a too optimistic view of the world, without the meaningful dark side that he clearly perceived and portrayed in nature and in men. In the 1850s he even reached the point of criticizing Emerson and Transcendentalism in works such as the novels *Pierre* and *The Confidence-Man*. In *Pierre*, the main character affirms:

Plato, and Spinoza, and Goethe, and many more belong to this guild of self-impostors, with a preposterous rabble of Muggletonian Scots and Yankees, whose vile brogue still the more bestreaks the stripedness of their Greek or German Neoplatonical originals. (245)

In a state of homelessness and despair, *Pierre* moves in with the “Apostles”, a group of idle idealists settled in an old church building, that might represent the Transcendentalists and whose ideals he refutes:

Away, ye chattering apes of a sophomorean Spinoza and Plato, who once didst all but delude me that the night was day, and pain only a tickle. Explain this darkness, exorcise this devil, ye can not. Tell me not, thou inconceivable coxcomb

of a Goethe, that the universe can not spare thee and thy immortality, so long as — like a hired waiter — thou makest thyself “generally useful.” Already the universe gets on without thee, and could still spare a million more of the same identical kidney. Corporations have no souls, and thy Pantheism, what was that? Thou wert but the pretentious, heartless part of a man. (352)

In *The Confidence-Man* Melville satirizes Emerson in the character of the mystic philosopher Mark Winsome:

A blue-eyed man, sandy-haired, and Saxon-looking; perhaps five and forty; tall, and, but for a certain angularity, well made; little touch of the drawing-room about him, but a look of plain propriety of a Puritan sort, with a kind of farmer dignity (...) he seemed a kind of cross between a Yankee peddler and a Tartar priest, though it seemed as if, at a pinch, the first would not in all probability play second fiddle to the last. (1043)

Apart from presenting Emerson as an apparent mystic that never fails to take care of his financial affairs, Thoreau is also portrayed in the role of Egbert, the “practical disciple” of Winsome and a “commercial-looking gentleman” (*Pierre* 1052). They both act in a cold way and without benevolence.

Besides Melville's works, his ambiguous attitude towards the ideas and the persona of the sage of Concord is also present in the correspondence and marginalia. Though they were never introduced to each other, Melville attended a lecture in Boston in February 1849 and exchanged letters about it with Evert A. Duyckinck: “I have heard Emerson since I have been here. Say what they will, he's a great man” (*Correspondence* 119). In his next letter, he alludes to a satirical cartoon that had appeared in the *New York Tribune*, portraying Emerson swinging in an inverted rainbow:

Nay, I do not oscillate in Emerson's rainbow, but prefer rather to hang myself in mine own halter than swing in any other man's swing. Yet I think Emerson is more than a brilliant fellow. Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a humbug — then is he no common humbug. (...) I had

heard of him as full of transcendentalisms, myths & oracular gibberish (...) To my surprise, I found him quite intelligible (...) I love all men who *dive* (...) I could readily see in Emerson, notwithstanding his merit, a gaping flaw. It was, the insinuation, that had he lived in those days when the world was made, he might have offered some valuable suggestions. These men are all cracked right across the brow. (*Correspondence* 121)

After asserting his independence from “Emerson’s rainbow” Melville alternates praise, suspicion and criticism and all on the same page. In spite of greatly admiring the lecturer, he was suspicious of the uncommon “humbug” of “domestic manufacture” that he might be, and deplored Emerson’s arrogance.

After attending the lecture, Melville continued to acquire and read Emerson’s books for the rest of his life. Meanwhile, he conducted a very lively written dialogue with Emerson’s works registered in the extensive marginalia. Melville’s annotations convey approval and admiration as well as critique of the excessive optimism or coldness of the author. In the following lines, two contrasting examples are presented. From *The Conduct of Life*: “True & admirable! Bravo!” (*Marginalia* 520). From “The Poet”:

This is admirable, as many other thoughts of Mr. Emerson’s are. His gross and astonishing errors & illusions spring from a self-conceit so intensely intellectual and calm that at first one hesitates to call it by its right name. Another species of Mr. Emerson’s errors, or rather, blindness, proceeds from a defect in the region of the heart. (*Marginalia* 525)

After meeting Hawthorne, who lived in the Berkshires, and having published the enthusiastic essay “Hawthorne and His Mosses”, Melville moved to the Berkshires as well. He purchased the house and the property of Arrowhead, Pittsfield, with borrowed money and spent the next thirteen years farming and writing there. After the commercial failure of *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*, he turned to magazine writing with the prospect of a steady income and the opportunity to experiment with new techniques.

“The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations”, published in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in May, 1856, is the last of the short pieces that Herman Melville wrote between 1853 and 1856, while

trying his chances as a short story writer. As in some other Melvillean works, the core narrative was based on a true story. This particular event occurred at the beginning of the century and was registered in several publications. Melville had access to at least three books containing the description of the incident: Timothy Dwight's *Travels in New England and New York* (1821), David Dudley Field's, *A History of the Country of Berkshire*, Massachusetts (1829) and Henry Thoreau's, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). He either had the annotated volume in his possession or mentioned the book elsewhere. One other piece of evidence is the fact that each source contains a different set of details used by Melville in his fictional retelling of the episode.

The short story is set in a domestic environment, in the old house of a family of five people — a couple, two daughters and an Irish maid — also present in former stories. Five years after moving to the old house, the father and narrator decides to enter the cobwebbed garret, fetching an odd looking old apple-tree table and a moldy old volume of Cotton Matter's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. According to the narrator the table is "domesticated" and used for tea and breakfast as well as a reading table (381). One night, during the reading of the book he hears an odd ticking — "Tick! Tick!" — coming out of the apple wood. Everyone in the family is astonished, but only on the following night is the cause revealed to the narrator: a shining bug emerges from the old apple-tree table. The maid throws the bug into the fire, but another ticking is heard and a second insect will come out of the table after a hectic night watch by the family waiting for it. These events elicit all kinds of responses from the characters. Melville's story is remarkable due to the way in which he portrays the contrasting reactions of the characters and the philosophical position underlying each different behavior. Just after being published, the story was reviewed in the *New York Dispatch*, as "an amusingly written chapter on Spiritual Manifestations" (qtd. in Hayes and Parker 99). But one could say that beneath the apparently simple and humorous narrative there are inner layers of a subtle philosophical debate.

Written twenty years after "Nature", "The Apple-Tree Table" is a complex response to complex Emersonian principles, where concepts so dear to Emerson, such as reason and faith or science and religion, apparently become antagonistic. The narrator, who professes to oscillate

“between Democritus and Cotton Mather”, presents a gloomy and somewhat gothic first description of the table:

When I first saw the table (...) set out with broken, be-crusted old purple vials and flasks, and a ghostly, dismantled old quarto, it seemed just such a necromantic little old table as might have belonged to Friar Bacon. Two plain features it had, significant of conjurations and charms — the circle and tripod (...) three crooked legs, terminating in three cloven feet. A very satanic-looking little old table, indeed. (*The Piazza Tales* 378)

The reference to Bacon — who was both a scientist and an alchemist — and all the necromantic details seem to place him closer to the “doleful, ghostly, ghastly Cotton Mather” whose “detailed accounts of New England witchcraft” he is reading in the night when it all starts (382-3). As the strange events unfold, the narrator is permanently moving between the two positions, because though he wants to look “as calm and composed as old Democritus in the tombs of Abdera” he confesses that “within me, the contest between panic and philosophy remained not wholly decided” (387-8). This oscillation is also a consequence of the image that he tries to project, since he is afraid but tries to conceal it from the family. There is a particular contrast with the attitude of his “matter-of-fact” wife, whom he considers to be “a female Democritus” (381, 394). This domineering and pragmatic character relies on reason and evidence to analyze the episode. On the other hand, the two daughters, Anna and, especially, Julie, “a poor girl, of a very nervous temperament” who at the beginning of the story “prophecied that, in connection with the table, something strange would happen”, think that the table is haunted and rely heavily on intuition and superstition (381-2). Biddy, the maid, is both superstitious and ignorant, as she mispronounces words such as “Holy Vargin!” or “bomnable bug” (386, 391) and wants to quit her job out of fear. Since its first appearance in the house, the two daughters and the maid are terrified by the table and often cry “Spirits! Spirits!”. When, after eating its way out of the table, the second bug emerges, at dawn, an epiphany occurs:

There wriggled the bug, flashing in the room’s general dimness like a fiery opal. Had this bug had a tiny sword by

its side — a Damascus sword — and a tiny necklace round its neck — a diamond necklace — and a tiny gun in its claw — a brass gun — and a tiny manuscript in its mouth — a Chaldee manuscript — Julia and Anna could not have stood more charmed. In truth, it was a beautiful bug — a Jew jeweler's bug — a bug like a sparkle of a glorious sunset (...) this was a seraphical bug (...) Julia and Anna gazed and gazed. They were no more alarmed. They were delighted.

"But how got this strange, pretty creature into the table?" cried Julia.

"Spirits can get anywhere," replied Anna. (395)

As the girls' fears are replaced by pious wonder and excitement, they keep their "spirit" theory. When the father decides to make inquiries about the incident, they suggest consulting Madame Pazzi, a conjureess. But the mother decides rather to consult Professor Johnson, the naturalist, to have a scientific explanation. At the end of the story, the "eminent" naturalist arrives to "enlighten" their ignorance and present his "computation" about the time that the bug had lain in the egg (396-7). He also despises the "spirit" interpretation: "she did not *really* associate this purely natural phenomenon with any crude spiritual hypothesis did she?" observed the learned professor, with a slight sneer" (397). But, more than before, Julie is now unstoppable in her belief:

Say what you will, if this beauteous creature be not a spirit, it yet teaches a spiritual lesson. For if, after one hundred and fifty years' entombment, a mere insect comes forth at last into light, itself an effulgence, shall there be no glorified resurrection for the spirit of man? (...) I still believe in spirits, only now I believe in them with delight, when before I but thought of them with terror. (397)

Merton Sealts considers that "The dialectic of old and new, spiritualism and naturalism, that runs through (...) 'The Apple-Tree Table' is a sign that in the magazine fiction of the mid-1850's Melville was doing more than merely writing to please the public" (94). The subtitle of the short story — "Original Spiritual Manifestations" — and the narrator warning that the incident "happened long before the time of the 'Fox Girls'", imply

that spiritualism is one the topics of the story (382). Spiritualists believe that spirits have the ability to communicate with the living and that they might even be able to provide knowledge about the nature of God. This movement, in which the Fox sisters, from Hydesville, New York, were major figures, had received a great deal of attention by the mid-nineteenth century. These girls allegedly made contact with spirits that communicated with them through rapping noises, audible to the public. Despite some controversy (some considered them to be either a fraud or agents of witchcraft), they became very popular as mediums performing sessions before big audiences. Through this other pair of sisters, Julie and Anna, the narrative embodies a direct critique of spiritualism, since in spite of their final proclamation about the teaching power of spirits and the glorified resurrection, the bug only lived for one more day. Furthermore, Melville also shows how close spiritualism is to Transcendentalism, since the girls repeat the Emersonian idea of the spirit in nature and, in their final statement, they somehow paraphrase Thoreau's metaphor about the resurrection of the bug:

Every one has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years (...) from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks (...) Who does not feel his faith in a resurrection and immortality strengthened by hearing of this? Who knows what beautiful and winged life (...) may unexpectedly come forth (...) to enjoy its perfect summer life at last! (*Walden* 226)

Following Sealts' terminology, the other topic of the narrative is naturalism. According to this philosophical idea, only natural causes or laws govern the natural world. This attitude, developed during the Enlightenment, is ingrained in the scientific method and rejects spiritual or supernatural explanations in the study of natural and physical phenomena. In the story, the wife and, moreover, Professor Johnson, the naturalist, represent the scientific approach to nature that excludes any spiritual possibility, though the explanation about the cortical layers of the slab reminds us of Emerson's

circles of nature. Melville satirizes the naturalist's attitude and hermetic scientific explanation, since his computation is apparently miscalculated:

It appeared that the egg must have been laid in the tree some ninety years, more or less, before the tree could have been felled (...) Allow eighty years for the age of the table, which would make one hundred and fifty years that the bug had lain in the egg. Such, at least, was Professor Johnson's computation. (397)

The narrative encompasses a satire on both spiritualism and naturalism, which stand for religion and science, given that neither of the two approaches provide a full explanation for the case. According to the principles of "Nature", Transcendentalism embraces both reason and faith, science and religion. So, ultimately, the short story is also a complaint about the incompleteness of the transcendentalist vision of the world that, for instance, excludes the dark or evil side of it.

The short story seems to be in close dialogue with "Nature". It even seems to illustrate several statements from the essay, starting with these lines from the epigraph:

And, striving to be man, the worm
Mounts through all the spires of form. (5)

The comparable metaphors of the worm and of the bug both striving to be man through spires was not certainly missed by Melville. Some other examples follow: "Few adult persons can see nature" (10); "Nothing divine dies" (18); "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact" (20). These sentences have their correspondence, respectively, in the portrayal of the girls and in the emergence of the bug, according to the spiritualist and Transcendentalist perspective. There is a sentence that seems to have inspired the detail of the naturalist's miscalculation in the short story:

But the best read naturalist who lends an entire and devout attention to truth, will see that there remains much to learn of his relation to the world, and that it is not to be learned by any addition or subtraction or other comparison of known quantities, but is arrived at by untaught sallies of the spirit, by a continual self-recovery, and by entire humility. (43)

While Emerson conceptualized the ideal naturalist as a humble truth-seeker who pays attention to both matter and spirit, Melville presents one character whose limited vision prevents him from seeing beyond additions and subtractions.

Throughout the short story there seems to be a deliberate play on the words “hum”, “bug” and “humbug”:

Any possible investigation of any possible spiritual phenomena was absurd; that upon the first face of such things, the mind of a sane man instinctively affirmed them a *humbug*, unworthy the least attention. (388)

I strove to look at the strange object in a purely scientific way. Thus viewed, it appeared some new sort of small shining beetle or *bug*, and, I thought, not without something of a *hum* to it, too. (389)

The first sentence conveys Democritus’s attitude of disregarding any possible spiritual phenomena. The second presents the narrator’s attempt at a scientific approach when he first sees the bug. In both cases, science seems to be the topic that brings together the “hum” and the “bug”. Emerson had used these words in his works, namely in “The American Scholar”: “Men in the world of to-day are *bugs*” (66); and in “Self-Reliance”: “My book should smell of pines and resound with the *hum* of insects” (266). More important than that is the fact that Melville had previously called Emerson a humbug: “Be his stuff begged, borrowed, or stolen, or of his own domestic manufacture he is an uncommon man. Swear he is a *humbug* — then is he no common *humbug*” (*Correspondence* 121).

To conclude, though Melville called Ralph Waldo Emerson a humbug, he was inevitably attracted to the hum of this bug. Just as the table and bug in the story have been domesticated and integrated in the family’s home, at his writing table, Melville has also domesticated Emersonian philosophy, achieving a practical and fictional application of the principles of “Nature”. A contemporary of Transcendentalism, a specific movement of American Romanticism, Herman Melville was among the voices that questioned its principles and practices, its virtues and flaws, thus contributing to the discussion and enrichment of the

Concord sage's legacy. Though less optimistic, they still shared many of their readings and aesthetic positions. In this short narrative he decided to explore the limited ability that science and religion have to explain natural phenomena when taken separately. So, he uses this story to criticize some excessively optimistic or limited perspectives of nature, given by science or religion. Melville also shows that in both, there is a thin line between mysticism and mystification, and that is what can quickly turn the hum of a bug into a humbug.

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ABSTRACT

Of the short pieces Herman Melville wrote between 1853 and 1856, while trying his chances as a short story writer, the last was “The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations”, published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in May, 1856. As in some other Melvillean works the core narrative is based on a true story to which he obtained access. Set in a domestic environment, with characters also present in former stories, the action takes place when a bug emerges from an ancient table, eliciting all kinds of responses. The contrasting reactions and the way they are portrayed show that beneath this apparently simple and humorous narrative there are inner layers of a subtle philosophical debate. Throughout his life, Melville maintained a permanent interest in Emerson's writings, in spite of a paradoxical double reaction of acceptance and rejection of his ideas. This article addresses the relationship between this short story and the principles stated in the essay “Nature”, as well as other positions of Melville concerning Ralph Waldo Emerson.

KEYWORDS

“The Apple-Tree Table”; Herman Melville; “Nature”; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendentalism

RESUMO

Das narrativas breves que Herman Melville escreveu entre 1853 e 1856, enquanto tentava a sua sorte como contista, a última foi “The Apple-Tree Table; Or, Original Spiritual Manifestations”, publicada no *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, em Maio de 1856. Tal como em outras obras de Melville, a narrativa central baseia-se numa história real a que ele teve acesso. Situada num ambiente doméstico, com personagens já presentes em contos anteriores, a acção acontece quando um insecto emerge de uma mesa antiga, despoletando vários tipos de respostas. As reacções contrastantes e o modo como elas são retratadas mostram que por baixo desta narrativa aparentemente simples e humorística existem camadas internas de

um subtil debate filosófico. Ao longo da vida, Melville manteve um interesse permanente na obra de Emerson, apesar de uma dupla reacção paradoxal de aceitação e recusa das suas ideias. Este artigo trata da relação entre este conto e os princípios enunciados em “Nature”, bem como outras posições de Melville em relação a Ralph Waldo Emerson.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

“The Apple-Tree Table”; Herman Melville; “Nature”; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Transcendentalismo
